

Voices: Is critical race theory incompatible with the gospel?

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Whether things that emerge from outside the church can be put into service for the work of the gospel is a perennial question in Christian history.

Whether in the form of Platonic philosophy in the first several centuries, the work of Aristotle in the Middle Ages, the tools of German higher criticism in the 19th century, or of mass media in the golden age of televangelism—Christians have made use of innumerable tools at hand for aid in mining the riches of Scripture.

To make use of such things is not, as some would put it, to import alien resources into Scripture. Rather, it is to view those tools at hand ultimately as strange gifts in the world that the church might view in light of Christ and put to work.

Augustine on making use of Egyptian gold

In his classic on how to read Scripture, Augustine of Hippo looks back upon the episode of Israel taking the riches of Egypt with them as they fled into the wilderness.

He concludes: “When [the Christian] separates himself in spirit from the miserable fellowship of these men, they ought to take away from them, and to devote to their proper use in preaching the gospel. Their garments—that is, human institutions such as are adapted to that intercourse with men which is indispensable in this life—we must take and turn to a Christian

use” (*On Christian Doctrine* II.40).

The trappings of their Egyptian masters were, in other words, to be repurposed into that which aided in the proclamation of the gospel and the teaching of Scripture.

Augustine here is not saying the garments of the Egyptians—or the philosophy of the Platonists or the television stations of the capitalists—are to be used uncritically. Instead, they are to be turned over in light of Scripture and put to God’s work, a new gift in search of its proper use.

This is the story of Israel coming out of Egypt, of Paul making use of his Roman citizenship, of early Christians making use of Greek instead of Hebrew—new tools, alien to the people of God, put into service of the gospel.

Critical race theory as a tool

Critical race theory has become the latest target of this long history. Southern Baptist seminary presidents recently [declared it “incompatible”](#) with the Baptist Faith & Message. Whatever may be said of the relationship between critical race theory and the statement of faith, the same cannot be said of the relationship between critical race theory and Scripture.

At its most basic, critical race theory is a way of identifying the ways in which racism is perpetuated by power, institutions and patterns of thought. Whatever else may be said of it—that it derives from functionally atheist origins or that it emphasizes Marxist materialism—does not mean its basic orientation of identifying the ways in which racism hides in relationships of power should be overlooked.

How critical race theory can illuminate Scripture

One example should suffice here to show how this might work. In Acts 6, we find the story of the first deacons, called to distribute bread to the widows among the house of Israel.

What is particularly interesting here, though, is the story begins because the Greek-speaking widows were being overlooked. Though the church was one, worshipping together, there evidently were biases emerging *against an entire group*.

The church's response here was not to be offended or to resort to saying, "We are one in the body of Christ," but to identify what was happening as needing a tangible, structural response to a persistent inequity.

And so, in Acts 6:5, we see deacons chosen to address this—seven men with *Greek* names. The ones who had been discriminated against within the structure were listened to, empowered and given authority.

Is critical race theory incompatible with the gospel?

In the seminary presidents' statement against critical race theory, "intersectionalism"—describing the ways in which some people are biased against in multiple ways—is denounced as incompatible with the gospel. But what I have described above—in the words of the recent statement opposing critical race theory—is just that, put in motion by the apostles.

The apostles acknowledged some wounds go deeper than others, and so, require a more robust response to the injustice suffered. Christians from outside Jerusalem already were at a disadvantage, and even more so the

women, and even *more so* the widows.

What is unjust is uncovered, and repaired in a way that alters the very structure of the church, that those who have been wounded might receive honor in an ongoing way, that the unity they profess might not be simply one of words, but of actions.

To do any less is not only to wave hands at longstanding wounds, but to deny ourselves of a powerful tool by which churches and denominations might find concrete ways to repent for long legacies of racism still living.

Critical race theory deserves more than short shrift

Detailing the ways in which critical race theory needs to be scrutinized and challenged requires a longer, more detailed and careful conversation.

Critical race theory shows us the ways in which power hides within institutions, but Christians must confess that at the bottom of the world is not sheer power, but God's love.

It emphasizes individualism, that lumping all people into a single racial category does damage to the pain of actual people, but Christians must confess there is a fundamental unity of all people as common creatures of God. There is work to do.

Critical race theory deserves far more careful consideration, more scholarly attention and more charity than it has been shown, for it allows what is hidden to be seen, what is unjust to be exposed and held up to the light.

To throw out a tool untested is not only to ignore the history of the church, but the witness of Scripture itself.

To do your own study of critical race theory, [*Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*](#) is short, clear, concise and lays out the issues directly.

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